

Report

Edison National Historic Site

■ 1.0 Site Description

The Edison National Historic Site (NHS) consists of Thomas Alva Edison's research and development laboratory and his home, Glenmont. Edison NHS is located in West Orange, New Jersey, approximately 15 miles west of New York City. The laboratory, at the corner of Main Street and Lakeside Avenue, is a complex of buildings encompassing an area of approximately five acres. Glenmont is located approximately one mile from the laboratory in Llewellyn Park, encompassing 15.67 acres. Llewellyn Park is one of the first private residential communities in the United States.

The laboratory contains 14 structures, six of which Edison had built in 1887 to serve as his laboratory. Edison's earliest ventures at West Orange included an improved or "perfected" phonograph, and an "instrument which does for the Eye what the phonograph does for the Ear," the motion picture camera and projector. At West Orange, as many as 200 chemists, machinists, engineers, and experimenters were employed by Edison, all devoted to the "rapid and cheap development of an invention."

The main laboratory, known as Building 5, was 250 feet (75 meters) long and 50 feet (15 meters) wide. It included Edison's library, a stock room, two machine shops, and approximately 30 experiment rooms on the second and third floors. The four small laboratory buildings – numbered 1 through 4 – included, from west to east, a physics laboratory, chemistry laboratory, chemical storage/pattern shop, and metallurgical laboratory. Each of the four small laboratories was 100 feet (30 meters) by 25 feet (7.5 meters). A sixth building, adjoining the eastern end of the main laboratory was once the boiler room and power house for the laboratory. Surviving non-laboratory buildings at the Site include four storage vaults, a gatehouse, a water tower, and a replica of the Black Maria, the world's first building constructed specifically as a motion picture studio (see Figure 1). Four storage vaults originally served as phonograph record, film, and document storage areas. These and a newer vault continue to house parts of the Site's collections.

The Visitor Center for the NHS is located in the former power house of the laboratory. It includes a bookstore, exhibits about Edison's inventions, and a video theater.

Glenmont, built in 1880, is a 29-room brick and timber mansion containing original furnishings and Edison family items. The mansion is shown in Figure 2. The estate grounds include gardens, the family greenhouse and barn, and garage. The graves of Thomas and Mina Edison are on the grounds of the estate.

Figure 1. Replica of the Black Maria



Figure 2. Glenmont



The Edison NHS is currently closed to the public while undergoing restoration, including environmental clean-up. It is expected to reopen in the spring of 2001. Previous annual visitation was as high as 80,000 although average visitation was approximately 60,000 visitors per year. Peak visitation is in the fall due to school trips and in December when Glenmont is decorated for the holidays. All visitors arrive initially at the Visitor Center at the Laboratory Complex and pay an entrance fee which enables them to visit both the laboratory and Glenmont. Guided tours are provided at both facilities.

Long-range plans include development of a new Visitor Center, a curatorial center, and other facilities that would allow these functions to be relocated from the historic buildings on the site, enabling a restoration of all facilities to the 1930s era. However, ability to implement these plans are dependent upon the success of current fundraising efforts. A private foundation has been established to manage fundraising activities and a recent grant from General Electric is supporting restoration of the main laboratory building.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Although school buses are a primary means of transporting school groups to the NHS, the vast majority of visitors access the site via private automobile. Parking is provided adjacent to the laboratory complex for approximately 40 to 50 automobiles. Buses can also be accommodated at this site. There are also 15 to 20 spaces at Glenmont with no allowance for buses. New Jersey Transit operates local bus service in West Orange which runs directly by the laboratory complex. A private bus operator, DeCamp Bus Lines, also operates service to West Orange from the New York City Port Authority building. A very small proportion of visitors to the site utilize the DeCamp service from Manhattan. These are generally laborers and subcontractors working on the site, rather than tourists.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

As indicated above, the Edison NHS consists of two discrete destinations, the laboratory complex and Glenmont, which are approximately one mile apart. Visitors normally drive in their personal vehicle to Glenmont after visiting the laboratory complex. However, Glenmont is located in a gated residential community and residents have expressed concern about private vehicles traveling through their neighborhood. Currently, there is a memorandum of understanding between the NPS and the community that the NPS will discourage random travel through Llewellyn Park. As a result, there has been discussion about the possibility of providing a shuttle service from the laboratory complex to Glenmont. Although the Superintendent thinks that this may have some benefit, it is still considered a low priority for the site. It was noted that the shuttle might be a means of increasing visitation to Glenmont but, because access to Glenmont is by guided tour only with a maximum of 15 visitors per tour, the site is already at capacity based on current visitation. Although a shuttle service might provide an opportunity to link the NHS with other attractions in the vicinity, the Superintendent indicated that there are no other destinations in the area which would logically be coupled with the site.

The Superintendent noted that traffic can sometimes be a problem on Main Street, a county road. There is currently no traffic signal on Main Street at the NHS, complicating pedestrian crossings to the site. Although this issue has been discussed with the Essex County traffic department, they have expressed no interest in installing a signal at this location, stating that the traffic signal/pedestrian crossing located two blocks from the site is available for anyone wishing to cross Main Street at a traffic signal.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

Public transit service is currently available to the Edison NHS via New Jersey Transit and DeCamp Bus Lines from Manhattan. A shuttle service between the laboratory complex and Glenmont has been considered as a means of transporting site visitors to Glenmont while providing a mechanism for controlling traffic between the two facilities, particularly in Llewellyn Park, a private residential community. However, the NHS Superintendent considers this a low priority, particularly since visitation at Glenmont is generally already at capacity when the NHS is in operation. As noted above, the Edison NHS is currently closed to the public while undergoing restoration.

■ 5.0 Persons Interviewed

Maryanne Gerbaukas, Superintendent